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A New Chapter in the Pope Plot

He is a model civil servant: meticulous, incorruptible, self-effacing, discreet. For more than two years Italian magistrate Ilario Martella has been investigating the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II. The world already knows who did it. Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Agca fired the shots that wounded John Paul on May 13, 1981. Arrested at the scene in St. Peter's Square, he was rushed to trial, convicted and sentenced to life in prison. But why did he do it? After the trial, the case was assigned to Martella, an accomplished criminal investigator. Last week he concluded his formal inquiry and sent a preliminary report to his superiors. Typically, Martella gave the pub-

make a case for the Bulgarian connection.

So does Claire Sterling. The American author, an expert on terrorism and a longtime resident of Italy, is about to publish a book called "The Time of the Assassins" (264 pages. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. \$14.95). She argues that Agca was recruited by the Bulgarians, who sent him to Rome as "an all-purpose hit man" in their local spy ring. Sterling's reading of the circumstantial evidence leads relentlessly to the conclusion that Bulgaria organized the assassination attempt on orders from Moscow. The Kremlin, she says, suspected that Washington had arranged John Paul's election. The subsequent rise of Soli-



ANSA photos

Consolo, Martella, an interpreter and Agca, John Paul: The pope was ready to forgive

lic no hint of his findings. But his dossier may contain a blockbuster: the first hard evidence that communist Bulgaria was behind the plot on the pope.

Next week John Paul will meet with Agca during a post-Christmas visit to a prison in Rome. The pope plans to say that he forgives his attacker, but the implications of Martella's report may not be written off so easily. If Bulgaria had a hand in the shooting, a trail of circumstantial evidence could lead all the way to the Kremlin—and, possibly, to the former KGB spymaster, Yuri Andropov.

Suspect: The trail begins with a much more modest suspect, Bulgarian airline official Sergei Antonov, who was arrested in Rome last year and accused of "active complicity" in the assassination attempt. Antonov's lawyer, Giuseppe Consolo, insists that his client is innocent. But even Consolo concedes that the Bulgarian probably will have to stand trial. That, in turn, suggests that Ilario Martella thinks he can

darity helped persuade Moscow that the Polish pope represented a serious "challenge to Soviet hegemony over all of Eastern Europe."

Sterling produces no major new revelations, and she admits that the link to Moscow probably cannot be proved. But she makes a forceful case that Agca was not a lone-wolf lunatic, religious fanatic or right-wing terrorist. Sterling describes how Agca was recruited by Turkish leftists and sent to a Palestinian training camp in Lebanon in 1977. Then, in 1979, Agca suddenly acquired right-wing credentials when he confessed to the murder of a liberal Turkish journalist. Soon he escaped from prison and was taken in hand by Oral Celik, a member of Turkey's neofascist "Gray Wolves."

In July 1980 the Wolves escorted Agca to Sofia, Bulgaria. There Agca was introduced to a group of arms dealers and drug smugglers known as the "Turkish Mafia" and to a Bulgarian known only as Mustafaev. Ster-

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ling claims that Mustafaev worked for Kintex, the state trading company and a "branch" of the Bulgarian DS, the secret service, that also controls the Turkish Mafia. And she says that it was Bekir Celenk, one of the mafiosi, who offered Agca \$1.3 million to kill the pope. Celenk was on Bulgaria's string, Sterling concludes, and the Bulgarians were acting for the Soviet KGB. "The Bulgarians are notorious," she writes, "for their willingness to take on the dirtiest jobs farmed out by the KGB: kidnapping, terrorism and murder—'wet work' in Soviet parlance."

With the Gray Wolves still serving as nannies, Agca began a long journey across Europe. In Rome, he joined up with three Bulgarians: Antonov, embassy cashier Todor Aivazov and Maj. Zhelyu Vassilev, an aide to the military attaché. The team allegedly considered killing Solidarity leader Lech Walesa when he visited the Vatican in early 1981. When that proved unworkable, they planned the attempt on the pope. Just after Agca fired the shots, a man was photographed running away from the scene. That man, says Sterling, was Oral Celik, who has since dropped from sight. Sterling theorizes that the plotters intended to kill Agca. Instead, she writes, a sturdy little nun named Sister Letizia seized Agca's arm, held him until the police arrived—and probably saved his life.

Hit List: Sterling charges that some Western governments would rather not know about the communist role in the plot—and that some Western officials have even tried to cover it up. She also claims that the U.S. Embassy in Rome attempted to interfere with her own reporting. She writes that an embassy official, Frederick Vreeland, told her she was on "the Bulgarian hit list" and advised: "Maybe you ought to cool it for a while." Vreeland purportedly said the Italian government had provided the tip about the hit list. But Sterling checked with Italian military intelligence and a general told her the story had come from "the American Embassy." Told about Sterling's charge last week, Vreeland replied: "I don't have a thing to say."

Why would Western intelligence agencies try to cover up for Andropov? "They did not want a confrontation with the Soviet Union," Sterling told NEWSWEEK's Andrew Nagorski. "I believe a great deal of information was available to all the major Western secret services, but they wanted it deeply buried . . . When the story of a Bulgarian connection began to come out, they were caught flat-footed."

Sterling, 64, appears to be a classic neo-conservative. A dropout from the Young Communist League many years ago, she now professes "no preference for any political party. I have only a total commitment to liberty." Sterling admits that the case depends on information supplied by Agca, who lies when it suits him. But she believes that Agca now thinks it is in his own interest to tell the truth, more or less, and that much of what he has said seems to be verifiable.

"I am convinced that the recommendation will be to send Antonov to trial," she says. "I wouldn't guarantee the outcome. Unprecedented diplomatic and political considerations come into play here. But unless Martella disagrees very sharply with the main lines of my findings, I will continue to be morally certain of the case."

Predictably, Moscow sneers at the case. Valentin Kamenev, a spokesman for the Soviet Foreign Ministry, calls it "a dead rat," adding: "The case has nothing to do with the Soviet Union." Consolo hints that a deal may yet be struck to trade his client for two Italian tourists who were arrested in Bulgaria last year on espionage charges. Consolo also has formally requested that Antonov be granted "provisional liberty" for health reasons.

Suspicion: But if Martella does accuse the Bulgarians of involvement in the plot, he will have plenty of support. Paul Henze, a National Security Council staffer under President Carter, reached conclusions similar to Sterling's in a recent book of his own ("The Plot to Kill the Pope." 216 pages. Scribner's \$14.95). At the time of the Agca trial, former CIA Director Richard Helms concluded that the Bulgarians might be involved. "I knew how the Bulgarians conducted their espionage and how they acted," he said last week. "It sounded to me exactly the way they would have operated."

While Antonov awaits his fate, the other

two Bulgarians accused of complicity, Aivazov and Vassilev, are safe at home. State Prosecutor Antonio Albano is reviewing Martella's findings. Eventually the magistrate will write his final report, which will be released to the public. "If the case is proved," muses a diplomat in Rome, "what then?" Most Western governments really don't want to answer that question. But there is a strong possibility that Martella will eventually force them to confront the awful suspicion that John Paul's deadliest enemy is Yuri Andropov.

RUSSELL WATSON with ANDREW NAGORSKI
in Rome and bureau reports